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SUBJECT: RETURNING IDPS TO ABU GHRAIB - PLAN OR PUBLICITY?

REF: 08 BAGHDAD 3942

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Robert S. Ford for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (SBU) Summary: On June 4, the Ministry of Displacement and Migration (MODM) presented its plan for large-scale returns to Abu Ghraib. The MODM wants to facilitate the return of 11,600 displaced families from Abu Ghraib. According to the MODM, most of Abu Ghraib,s displaced are squatters in Hurriya, Chicook and Kerbala. MODM wishes to organize a coordinated effort, supported by the Implementation and Follow-up Committee for National Reconciliation (IFCNR), Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), U.S. military, Office of IDP and Refugee Affairs (REF), international organizations (IO) and international non-governmental organizations (NGO). MODM,s initial step will be to establish two teams: one to assess the extent of property and infrastructure damage in Abu Ghraib; the second team will identify families interested in returning to Abu Ghraib and assess their needs. The Government of Iraq has yet to make a decision whether to proceed, as preliminary meetings about the MODM initiative have raised concerns over the security implications and the ability of Abu Ghraib to absorb mass returns. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) June 4, MODM Director General (DG) for Humanitarian Affairs Samir Nahi told representatives of IFCNR, ISF Baghdad Operations Command (BOC), REF, USAID Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA), UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), International Organization of Migration (IOM) and International Medical Corps (IMC) of the Ministry,s plan for mass returns to Abu Ghraib. MODM DG Samir explained that the Ministry had chosen to focus on Abu Ghraib because the area had suffered considerable displacement, but to date had very few returns. MODM has registered 11,600 displaced families from Abu Ghraib. (Note: MODM registered a total of 92,936 IDP families from Baghdad, including Abu Ghraib. End note.) According to Samir, the majority of Abu Ghraib,s displaced are scattered throughout western Baghdad. Some have illegally occupied homes in Hurriya or apartments in state owned buildings, while others live in makeshift shelters on government land in IDP clusters such as Chicook. MODM acknowledged that it could not facilitate returns on its own and requested that IFCNR be responsible for securing support from Government of Iraq (GOI) line ministries, while the BOC would coordinate efforts with local ISF. The DG hopes that focusing on a specific neighborhood and pooling the efforts of various stakeholders will generate more immediate and tangible results.

¶3. (U) Bordering Anbar, Abu Ghraib is the western most qada (rural district) of Baghdad Province. After 2006, Abu Ghraib became an Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) stronghold and subsequent sectarian violence, resulted in the displacement of its Shia population. The violence also inflicted extensive property damage and decimated the local economy. On May 25, OFDA and REF visited Abu Ghraib with the U.S. Army 2-1 Combat Brigade Team to discuss the community,s needs with the Kandari Nahia (rural neighborhood) Council, a local women,s community group, a sheikh council and Sunni IDPs from Baghdad who had

moved to the area. Most said that Abu Ghraib was relatively safe and no one cited the security situation as an impediment to potential progress. The lack of economic opportunity and damaged property were the community's chief concerns. The women's community group, headed by a nahia (neighborhood) council member, expressed a need for micro-grants, vocational training and funding for a center. Many of the IDPs who had relocated to Abu Ghraib wished to stay, but complained of the lack of employment opportunities and of government services. A sense of abandonment by the Shia dominated central and provincial government was a common sentiment among Abu Ghraib's predominantly Sunni population. In 2008, a GOI initiative to return IDPs to Abu Ghraib as seen as politically motivated and favoring Shia, and resulted in a temporary surge of violence (REF).

14. (C) According to the MODM's DG Samir, most of the residents of the Chicook IDP cluster (a shantytown adjacent to Hurriya in west Baghdad) are from Abu Ghraib and, with better employment prospects, would return home. At the June 4 meeting, Samir stated that many of Abu Ghraib's displaced were squatting on government property. He added that under Prime Minister Order 101, the State was entitled to evict them immediately. However, the DG denied allegations that the MODM or the GOI had plans to forcibly remove IDPs from government property and relocate them to Abu Ghraib, but, without mention of a time frame, said that the government was interested in reclaiming its property.

15. (SBU) On May 24, OFDA and REF visited an IDP cluster in western Ghazaliya. Located on the urban outskirts of Baghdad, the Ghazaliya IDP cluster is a shantytown - home to

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approximately 200 families, consisting of one room homes, approximately 100 square feet in size, constructed from clay blocks with no running water and only intermittent electricity from generators. Local ISF informed REFOFF that the homes had been illegally built on government land, but the ISF did not know which ministry owned the land. Children from the shantytown do not attend school because it is too far and families cannot afford the school lunches. One woman informed us that she pays 75,000 Iraqi dinars (\$64; 1USD = 1170 IQD) in rent for her home. The woman did not have a job, but earned money by selling half of her food rations provided through the Public Distribution System (PDS) and using the other half to make baked goods for sale. The woman said she could not afford to move back to her original neighborhood and hoped that she could stay where she was, but wished improved living conditions. (Note: While discussions with the Ghazaliya IDP cluster residents revealed that many are economically displaced from Taji and Shula, not Abu Ghraib, the conditions there are comparable to other clusters, including Chicook. End note.)

16. (C) Comment: The MODM's efforts to facilitate returns to Abu Ghraib is a welcome initiative that may warrant USG, IO and NGO support. The risk is that a poorly administered return process would have a destabilizing effect and increase human suffering. Most importantly, returns must be voluntary; the manner in which MODM identifies possible returns and addresses the needs of those who do not wish to move to Abu Ghraib will serve as indicator to the MODM's true intentions. The MODM's attempt to include GOI line ministries could be an acknowledgement that sustainable returns is beyond its purview of humanitarian assistance and may clear the way for a phased approach to returns that focuses on community development. We will keep discussing with the MODM and support GOI efforts that facilitate voluntary returns through policies that improve security, rehabilitate shelter, expand economic opportunities and provide greater access to basic services. End Comment.

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